

Changes in the Image of the Japanese Society after Collapse of Soviet Union

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Introduction

The news about the meeting between Prime-minister of Japan Shinzo Abe and President of Russia Vladimir Putin are still fresh in memory. It is still not quite clear what concrete results will the “new approach” in Japan-Russia relations bring for both countries, but what can be stated for sure is that Japan and Russia are neighbor countries with long history of mutual relations.

Many different images of each other have been produced in the course of the above-mentioned relations, and the primary objective of this paper is to shed light on how Japan has been viewed in the recent period, that is after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Another objective is to try to find out what the fact of collapse of the Soviet Union itself meant for both countries, especially in terms of Russian-language image production concerning the Japanese society.

1 Image of Japan in popular literature written in the Soviet Union

Before we proceed to the main topic of interest in this paper, we would like to briefly introduce the main characteristic features of the image of Japanese society in popular literature written in Russian language in the Soviet Union.¹

Beginning from the period of establishment of relations between Russia and Japan, there were many various accounts of the images of Japanese society in Russian language. However, certain common features, as well as differences, can be traced in the works of respective authors. We give an account of them below.

Before we proceed with depicting such accounts, we would like to point out an important

¹ This will be done based on the analysis conducted by the author in previous paper related to this topic. (see references: Japanese Studies in Russia and the Soviet Union: Focusing on Their Diversity and Commonality).

thing concerning the ideological situation in the Soviet Union. The ideology of communism/socialism was the one that has literally permeated almost all spheres of both public and intimate spheres, and the sphere of producing accounts about foreign countries was not an exemption.

In many, if not all, cases, the authors were controlled pretty much by special divisions of censorship that were “evaluating” whether this or that work of literature is “ideologically fit enough” to be distributed to the readers.

There is one very easy to understand example of this situation, it concerns Vsevolod Ovchinnikov, about whom we will discuss in more detail in part 3 of this paper. He wrote his best-selling book, “A Branch of Sakura”, in 1971, but it was only in 1985 that he managed to receive the State Prize of the USSR awarded to the best works written in respective fields.

According to Ovchinnikov himself, despite the almost unimaginable popularity of his book among common people, it was considered the one that does not contain “enough” ideological background or ideological elements. In other words, V. Ovchinnikov in his book did not criticize Japanese society to the extent that was demanded by the censorship divisions at that time, and this was the main reason why he did not receive the state prize of the Soviet Union immediately after the publication of his book.

If we come back to the commonalities and differences between the Russian-language works written in the Soviet Union, this ideological element will be one of the first to mention. We find it quite interesting that the authors of books about Japanese society found various ways to cope with this “ideological pressure”. Actually, the extent to which the afore-mentioned ideological elements were included in their works can be divided into three categories.

The first one will be to include such elements as much as possible, which naturally means more chances to publish one’s works. Authors such as N. Fedorenko and I. Latyshev were among those who used this way of dealing with ideology. The second category includes the works of V. Ovchinnikov, who, also according to his own words, included the ideological elements in a very small quantity. And the last, but not the least, category includes two authors, I. Erenburg and V. Tsvetov, who had a very interesting strategy of writing their books about Japan. They created a very thick “layer” of ideological elements at the surface of their texts, however below that they were sending a different message of a “true Japan” to their readers.

Such three approaches to including or not including certain ideological elements in one's works about Japan, to our mind, can be classified as a certain diversity of writings about the Japanese society in the Soviet Union. Another element of diversity of such works can be seen in the focus the writers used while writing about the Japanese society.

If we take, for instance, V. Ovchinnikov, we can see that he was trying to explain various peculiarities of the Japanese society by referring to the ethical and aesthetical elements of their national character. However, I. Erenburg, for instance, was highly evaluating the ability of Japanese people to cope with difficult situations in their life. N. Fedorenko and I. Latyshev, on the contrary, stood on the position that Japan is a typical representative of the group of capitalist countries, and were looking at Japanese society through the "prism" of "Cold War" paradigm. This meant that the numerous problems which Japan experienced after the WWII were in many cases caused by belonging to the group of capitalist countries.

Another example of a unique approach to describing Japan is putting it into a bigger global context. Writers such as N. Konrad and L. Mechnikov, while describing the Japanese society of their period, tried to classify Japan within their original frameworks of world history and world cultural history (N. Konrad), or natural history of the world (L. Mechnikov).

We have mentioned the diversity of the works of Russian authors writing about the Japanese society, however, what about the commonalities that can be found in their writings? We can state that there are at least three elements that can be commonly seen in the Russian-language popular literature written about Japan.

The first one concerns the geographical position of the Soviet Union as a country. In other words, the Soviet Union was a country with quite uncertain (or, to use a better word, "dubious") identity. It was the biggest country in the world, occupying around 20 percent of all the land at the Earth, but at the same time it was a country belonging to both Europe and Asia, and not belonging to both of them.² In many of Russian-language writings about the Japanese society, Japan was viewed at as an Asian country from the point of view of the European country, which almost automatically meant the usage of all the related contents. However, there should be the writings about Japan from the viewpoint of, for instance, the countries of Central Asia that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union,

² Surely, the Soviet Union could be called the country belonging to Eurasia, but such statement will be a bit too simplified.

and such writings should become the focus of our next works.

The second common point in all the writings about the Japanese society concerns the afore-mentioned ideological elements. That is, though we analyzed that the extent of the ideological “color” within the works of respective authors differed, the truth of the matter is that all writing about Japan in the Soviet Union included such ideological elements. The point here is that only the “degree” or extent of such ideological background differed depending on the author.

Here we would also like to underline the fact that such ideological background should not be treated only as something that worsened the quality of the narratives about Japan. Actually, in some cases it was the presence of such ideological elements that made the authors think about how to “overcome” them and to produce their own and unique account of the Japanese society.

The third common feature of the Russian-language writings about the Japanese society in the Soviet Union is the attitude of the authors themselves to Japan, which in many cases was quite positive, and sometimes even amiable. This was partially caused by the Soviet-style communist propaganda, which declared that the workers and farmers of Japan are exploited by the big capital of industrial corporations etc., but those workers and farmers are the same as their counterparts in the Soviet Union. This led to a very interesting phenomenon, when many people in the Soviet Union felt compassion towards common Japanese people.

When talking about the main characteristic features of the Russian-language popular literature about Japan written in the Soviet Union, we should also mention the existence of the seeds of a new, original approach to viewing other cultures, which can be traced back in the works of V. Ovchinnikov.

2 Collapse of the Soviet Union as a trigger for an independent and non-prejudiced view of the Japanese society?

Collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was an event that influenced not only the republics that constituted this huge country and the neighboring European countries, but the whole history of the world at the time. First of all, such collapse meant changes in the ideological basis of the respective countries. The ideology of communism/socialism that was in the

core of the social, cultural and political life in the Soviet Union, has gone, but there was no ideology strong enough to replace it. What did this mean for the japanology and narrative about Japan after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

As we have already mentioned, this event became a turning point in many senses. This meant not only changes within ideology as well as political, economic and social systems, but also re-positioning of Japan as a neighboring country with legacy of territorial disputes, and a perspective business partner. Negotiations concerning the Kuril islands/Northern territories which we mentioned in the Introduction of this paper are possible because there was a basis laid during perestroika period and immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Collapse of the Soviet Union also meant more opportunities for Russian-speaking people to visit Japan, because borders became open and there were no restrictions to visit foreign countries, as during soviet times. However, the paradoxical thing is that the number of writings about Japan in Russian language in post-soviet period became much smaller than during the Soviet times.

3 Vsevolod Ovchinnikov: “A Branch of Sakura 30 Years Later”, essays in newspaper etc.

Soviet times, especially 1970-1980s, witnessed the huge popularity of non-fiction literature written about Japan, the country towards which Soviet people had special sentiments. One of the most popular writers about Japan was “Pravda” journalist Vsevolod Ovchinnikov, whose book “A branch of sakura” (1971) became a million-seller, not only in the Soviet Union but in Japan as well. Let us briefly introduce the figure of Vsevolod Ovchinnikov³. His biography is briefly given in Table 1.

³ Actually, while working on the master thesis at Sociology Department in Faculty of Letters in Kyoto University, the author had a very brief chance to talk to V. Ovchinnikov directly, via mobile phone. The main objective of that phone call was to ask him directly about the possible influence (or absence of it) of Ruth Benedict on the works of V. Ovchinnikov. However, when the author posed this question, the answer was quite categorical: “I am extremely busy and do not have time to waste on talking about the matters like this. You can find all the answers to your questions in my works”.

This conversation took place in March 2011, and since then all the analysis of Ovchinnikov’s books done by the author is based solely on their contents.

Year	Event
17.11.1926	Born in Leningrad (now called “Saint-Petersburg”)
1941-1942	Experiences the blockade of Leningrad by German army
1942-1943	Studies at high school while working as an accountant at “Trudovik” kolhoz in Omsk region
1951	Graduates from Moscow Oriental University (oriental studies, majoring in Chinese language)
Same year	Enters “Pravda”, newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
1953-1959	Special correspondent of “Pravda” in Beijing
1962-1968	Special correspondent of “Pravda” in Tokyo
1968-1974	Head of section of Asia and Africa
1971	Receives Vorovskyi prize (one of the most famous prizes for publicists) for “A Branch of Sakura”, published in Moscow literary magazine “New World” in 1971
1974-1978	Special correspondent of “Pravda” in London
1980s	Chairperson of “International Panorama”, a TV program introducing news from foreign countries to the Soviet audience; political commentator and publicist on current affairs in “Pravda”; is actively writing and giving comments on international topics. Visits various foreign countries on business trips
1985	Receives the State Prize of the Soviet Union
From 1994~	Commentator on current affairs at “Russian newspaper”, the media of government of the Russian Federation

From 2000~	Starts periodical submission of articles and essays to the “travelogues” column of the afore-mentioned newspaper
Present days	Honorary member of the “Russian-Japanese Committee of the 21 st Century”; working as an expert in the network of political experts “kreml.org”

(Table created by the author based on Ovchinnikov’s online essays and articles, as well as his book “A Branch of Sakura 30 years later”)

As we can see from the table above, V. Ovchinnikov was not an expert in Russia-Japan relations, neither was he a japanologist, that is, an expert on Japanese society. He got an education as a specialist in Chinese language, and started his career in “Pravda” as a young journalist specializing on Chinese affairs. His first experience of a special correspondent was in Beijing, where he spent 6 years in the middle and end of 1950s.

However, end of 1950s saw a sudden shift in relations between the Soviet Union and China, which started resembling those between the Soviet Union and the USA during the “cold war”. For V. Ovchinnikov, such change in the “temperature” of relations between his country of origin and the country he was a specialist in, meant that the sphere of his specialization should be changed. And he did change it, choosing Japan as his new country of interest.

He was sent, as a special correspondent, to Tokyo, where he stayed for 6 years in 1960s. This experience later turned into one of the most well-known in former Soviet Union (and post-Soviet countries as well) best-selling book, “A Branch of Sakura”. However, V. Ovchinnikov was unique in the sense that he did not put restrictions on himself in the sense of field of specialization. In 1970s, he served as a special correspondent of “Pravda” in London, at the same time expanding his sphere of interest from one or several countries to international relations in general. Below we will outline the main points V. Ovchinnikov wanted to stress about the Japanese society 30 years after his first visit to this country.

3-1 “A Branch of Sakura 30 Years Later”

The books V. Ovchinnikov has written about the Japanese society are quite interesting in the sense that they were written during a long period of time, around 30 years in the case

of “A Branch of Sakura”. Actually, it was due to the invitation from the Japanese side that Ovchinnikov managed to visit Japan in the 21st century and to “update” his bestseller. He stayed in Japan for 3 months, and several essays that he wrote during this stay were published online.

The topics he wrote about in this series of essays included the following ones: a developed network of transportation means, and the problem of expensive tickets; the development of the means of transmitting information, such as mobile phones and the internet (however, he is pointing out that Japan is getting behind the USA in terms of development of such means, and it needs to develop its own, original methodology in order to catch up with the USA); leadership in the sphere of robotics industry; the low food self-sufficiency rate of Japan, and the problems faced by the farmers; the law concerning gender equality; the problem of late marriages; the problems parents (and teachers) experience when educating children; the problems which the big earthquake in Kobe area in 1995 made obvious; construction of Awaji Strait Bridge and Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line, as well as Kansai airport; the problem of “karoshi” which he compares with “seppuku”.

As we can see from the list of topics V. Ovchinnikov has covered in his writings about the Japanese society, he was more or less adequately transmitting the problems that the Japanese society started facing in the 21st century, many of them were caused by the wave of globalization that reached Japan and other Asian countries as well. Another important point to mention is the fact that the ideological “color” of this version of narrative about Japan is almost absent, which means that there were no particular restrictions that V. Ovchinnikov might have experienced.

3-2 Other essays and articles about Japan

As we have mentioned above, V. Ovchinnikov has also been writing essays about various countries, and Japan occupies the second place after China in the sphere of his interests while writing such essays. From 2001 to 2010, he wrote 89 articles or essays about Japan, Japanese society, Japan’s place in the world and the problems Japan is facing in the modern globalized age. However, if we take a look at the variety of topics that interest V. Ovchinnikov in this series of essays, we will understand that his focus as a journalist has undergone changes that are equivalent to the changes of the essence of the problems the Japanese society is experiencing in the 21st century. In other words, V. Ovchinnikov is quite adequately transmitting the image of changing Japanese society to his readers in

Russia.

4 Books by “young generation” of Russian language writers

V. Ovchinnikov can be called “the legend” or “the standard” of Russian-language literature about Japan, but he was actually just one of the many writers – travelers, journalists, novelists etc. – who made Japan the object of their narratives. We can say that the secret of his success was the language which he used, which was easy to understand even for people with no higher education, and the (almost unique at that times) ability to combine in his books various approaches to one and the same topic. This last way of writing might become an object of critics because of its dubious nature, but it was exactly this style of writing that made V. Ovchinnikov so popular.

As we have examined in the previous part of this paper, V. Ovchinnikov is active after the collapse of the Soviet Union as well. However, there was a number of relatively young writers who have contributed, in their own way, to the field of Soviet popular literature about Japan. Below we introduce and describe the main characteristic features of the books of the most prominent among such writers.

4-1 “Gaizin notes”

Vadim Smolenskiy who wrote a book of essays about his life in Japan, is more famous as a translator of novels of Haruki Murakami, “Hear the wind sing” and “Pinball 1973”.

“Gaizin Notes” by Vadim Smolenskiy is a collection of essays written in the period of January 1998-November 2004. This book can be called “representative” in the series of books about Japan written by young Russian authors, so we will focus on its contents below.

The author describes his life in Japan, where he spent 9 years, as a researcher at a university in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima prefecture. This is book’s originality lies in the fact that there is nothing from the so-called “knowing-the-country” genre in it. Nothing is written about tea ceremony, geishas and manga, and sakura is mentioned in a bit frustrating way:

“That’ true! I always knew that there is nothing besides sakura blooming. The same can be said about all other things that surround us (here). Everything around us: oh, the East, oh, the culture! This is not a culture, this is just a place without anything (important)”.

Instead, the author is writing about the everyday life in Japanese countryside, about communicating with Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, his work in Japanese university and “strange” situations he is experiencing in Japan, for instance meeting a “ganguro” girl whom he almost fell in love with. But what is unique about this book is the fact that even the weirdest situations described by the author all in all end up happily, and his communication partners show their real face.

4-2 “Gohan: A Japanese Notebook”

4-3 Recipe Book of Samurai, or Anything but a Book about Japan

5 Conclusions

So what can be the conclusions concerning the Russian-language popular literature written in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union? We will try to mention them referring to Part 1 of this paper, in which we described the commonalities and differences of the Russian-language works produced during Soviet times.

The findings are yet preliminary, but what can be stated with certainty is the fact that collapse of the Soviet Union and 1990s saw a change in the general tone of narratives about Japan. The “ideological accent” has gone, substituted by a very strong desire to describe Japan objectively and to create a “true-to-life” picture for the audience. However, this has led in part to description of Japan “without any limits”, which in turn has been distorting the image of this country in post-Soviet countries.

6 Towards the topic of this Workshop: ??

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